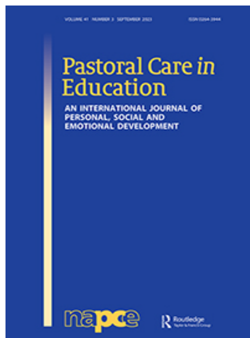

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores experiences of pastoral staff, working in social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) special secondary schools, regarding the psychological impact of their work. To date, attention has been given to the educational experiences of pupils attending SEMH schools and teachers working with pupils with SEMH needs in mainstream schools. Whilst these studies provide insight into the experiences of pupils and teachers, they do not explore the experiences of those occupying pastoral roles in SEMH schools. Using narrative research, five participants, recruited from schools in the Northwest of England, took part in interviews, conducted via video conferencing. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis adopted a two-stage approach. The first stage focused on each individual narrative, preserving it as a whole story, the second involved analysis across the five narratives. Both stages used Fraser's (2004) seven stage approach, enabling long sections of narrative to be broken down into themes, whilst preserving the nuances within and across narratives. The first stage of analysis identified numerous themes specific to each participant, the second stage, the focus for this paper, identified two common themes across the narratives: '*It's a struggle*,' 'and '*My emotionally dirty work*'. This is the first study to explore the psychological impact of working in SEMH secondary schools, from the perspective of pastoral staff. Findings have policy and practice implications; defining professional standards, appropriate training, and tailored supervision. An 'ethos of care' within SEMH schools could mitigate against the impact of struggles and work perceived as emotionally dirty.

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SEMH; pastoral support staff; psychological impact; dirty work

Introduction

Since the introduction of the government's Every Child Matters Agenda (Department for Education DfE, 2003), schools have been assigned greater responsibility for the pastoral care of their pupils (Edmond & Price, 2009).

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Objections to teachers taking on more caring and therapeutic roles have been raised (Ecclestone, 2011), with concerns focusing on the limited time they have available to deal with student welfare (Littlecott et al., 2018; Mackenzie, 2012), and/or feeling ill-equipped to support pupils' emotional wellbeing (Partridge, 2012). Consequently, it is largely pastoral staff who support the emotional wellbeing of pupils (Fitzsimmons et al., 2019; Partridge, 2012).

Background

Those providing pastoral care appear to have a variety of job titles, with the commonality that these are, in the main, non-teaching roles. Such variance in job titles has led to boundaries between different responsibilities to become blurred, making defining and differentiating between positions difficult (Edmond & Price, 2009). For example, confusion can arise between the roles of teaching assistant and pastoral staff, as the former perform some pastoral duties, such as managing behaviour (Clarke & Visser, 2019), running nurture groups (Middleton, 2019, 2018) or responding to pupils' emotional crises (Partridge, 2012; Purdy, 2013). However, the primary duties undertaken by most teaching assistants is supporting teaching and learning, rather than pastoral responsibilities (Skipp & Hopwood, 2019). The focus for this research was on staff who were employed in dedicated pastoral roles, spending most of their time supporting pupils' emotional wellbeing and personal safety, and helping them to understand and articulate their feelings and emotions (Jones, 2020; Partridge, 2012).

The emotional intensity of supporting pupils with SEMH needs is well documented in the literature (Edwards, 2016; Fitzsimmons et al., 2019; Gillies, 2011; Michael & Frederickson, 2013; Rae et al., 2017; Willis & Baines, 2018). However, little acknowledgement is given to the extent of the emotional and physical intensity inherent within the pastoral role; the work being emotionally intense and demanding (Middleton, 2019; Willis & Baines, 2018).

SEMH schools, have been described as the '*most chaotic of settings and situations*' (McLoughlin, 2010, p. 235). They operate under several different legal frameworks, including academy trusts, maintained special schools, pupil referral units and independent special schools. They often specialise in a particular area of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), such as complex SEMH needs. The number of SEMH schools, and pupils educated in them, is unknown, as the DfE registration uses the generic term of 'special school.' Many pupils attending these schools have been permanently excluded from other schools, due to challenging behaviours (Macleod et al., 2013). Such behaviours, also referred to as externalised behaviours, often attract more attention as they are observable, and present greater challenges in a mainstream school environment (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019). However, in

larger mainstream schools internalised behaviour, such as avoidance, social withdrawal or self-harm can often go unnoticed (Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Gill et al., 2017). Both externalised and internalised behaviour manifests in SEMH schools.

Pupils in SEMH schools tend to be disaffected pupils with histories of aggression (Macleod et al., 2013). Behaviours can include violence (Willis & Baines, 2018), anger and emotional intensity (Al-Ghabban, 2018), swearing (Stanforth & Rose, 2020), spitting, chair throwing and abuse (Gillies & Robinson, 2010), all of which are often linked to SEMH needs (Graham et al., 2019). Consequently, as well as pastoral support being emotionally and physically demanding, it can be dangerous (Cole, 2010; Middleton, 2018). Experiencing challenging behaviours over a sustained period can be a stressful, and sometimes negative experience (Willis & Baines, 2018). Many staff working with pupils within SEMH schools, can also be exposed to distressing trauma narratives (Edwards, 2016), with pastoral staff fulfilling empathetic roles being at even greater risk of experiencing vicarious distress and related psychopathology (McCormack & Adams, 2016).

To date, available research has failed to examine the psychological wellbeing of pastoral support staff working in SEMH secondary schools. Most of the research focuses on teachers' experiences, within the context of supporting pupils with SEMH needs in mainstream school environments (Fitzsimmons et al., 2019; Middleton, 2019, 2018; Partridge, 2012; Stoll & McLeod, 2020). Willis and Baines's (2018), however did situate their study in an SEMH school, albeit a primary school, the focus being on group supervision as a strategy for support. With a dearth of research focusing on pastoral staff working in SEMH secondary schools, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of pastoral staff employed in SEMH secondary schools to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological impact of their work.

Methods

The methodology for this study was narrative inquiry, as it draws insights from examining how people compose stories (Creswell, 2018). Through stories people create order, make sense of their lives, and convey their experiences to others (Josselson, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2005). A narrative approach is suitable for research that seeks to understand individuals' life experiences and how they evolve over time (Creswell, 2018). During the research process the social realities perceived and constructed by the participants are uncovered and interpreted (Josselson, 2013; Sparkes, 2005).

Ethics

Ethics approval was given by the University of XXX's Post-Graduate Research Ethics Panel, under reference XXXXXXX-XXX. As the ethics application was

submitted during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were put in place in relation to 'in person' interviews, the approval authorising virtual interviewing only. Each participant signed a written consent form and returned it via email prior to participating in the study.

When distressing information is shared, qualitative research can expose participants and researchers to risk of psychological harm (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). However, most participants can discuss difficult issues, and harmful reactions are rare (Draucker et al., 2009). To mitigate against potential harm, The University of XXX's Ethics Policy and The British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2014; 2021) were followed throughout the research process and a risk assessment and a distress policy were in place. To mitigate against these potential issues in the immediacy of the interview situation, there was a 10/15-minute unrecorded chat immediately prior to each interview and a debrief at the end. Longer term arrangements involved participants being given contact details for support organisations, including the NHS 'Every Mind Matters' website, Samaritans and MIND, should they decide they needed further support. Risks to the interviewer were mitigated by maintaining awareness of personal and professional boundaries and operating within the limits of professional competence.

Recruitment

A purposeful sampling strategy, with pre-selected criteria was used to recruit participants able to address the research aim. The inclusion criteria for participants required them to be employed in a pastoral role in a secondary SEMH school for at least one year prior to interview, directly working with pupils for 18 hours per week, be aged 18 and above, and have command of the English language.

Recruitment posters were emailed to professional contacts, who disseminated them via staff notice boards and email. Potential participants were asked to contact the primary researcher (first author) direct to discuss their interest. After discussing the study with the primary researcher, potential participants were sent an information sheet describing the research process, and outlining expectations, confidentiality, participant rights, and how the information collected would be used. Once they had chance to consider the information, they could contact the researcher again to arrange participation if they so wished. After signing and returning the consent form an appropriate time for the interview was agreed between researcher and participant. In total five people agreed to participate.

As the pool of potential participants was relatively small, two people who were known to the primary researcher answered the recruitment advertisement and became participants. Extra care was taken to protect the anonymity of these participants, and reflexivity played a crucial role for the researcher in terms of

being self-aware and understanding the effect that she may have had on the research process (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020).

Of the five people participating, four were female and one was male. Two of the participants were aged between 46–59; two between 36–45; and one was in the age range of 18–25 years. Three of the participants had been in their current posts for under two years, however two participants had worked in SEMH schools for approximately 10 years, with one participant having 20 years' experience in such settings.

Data collection

Narrative interviewing is flexible, acknowledging the importance of the research relationship in securing quality data (Josselson, 2013). A narrative interview protocol was designed to ensure that the interview was free flowing and adopted a conversational style (Riessman, 1993). Participants were advised that, with their consent, the interview would be audio-recorded. As an opening to the interview the following statement was used,

> *I am really interested to learn about you and the work that you do with children and young people in a SEMH school. Please tell me as much as possible about you and your setting*

This statement was used to place the focus of the interview on the participants and for them to interpret and respond in a way that was meaningful to them. The remainder of the interview followed the topic-based interview protocol but was not ruled by it (Fraser, 2004). The participants required very little prompting and the conversation flowed. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and all identifying data was removed.

Analysis

Staying true to the philosophy of narrative inquiry it is acknowledged that the analytical process is one of co-construction. There are multiple possible interpretations of a narrative, with the researcher creating a story of their own (Fraser, 2004). To ensure trustworthiness the analysis is a balance between data extracts and the interpretations made (Clarke et al., 2015). To ensure that the data analysis was theoretically consistent and coherent, Fraser's (2004) seven phase approach was adopted. The seven phases involved hearing the stories, experiencing each other's emotions; transcribing the material; interpreting individual transcripts; scanning across different domains of experience; linking the personal with the political; identifying commonalities and differences among participants; and writing academic narratives of personal stories (Fraser, 2004).

All analysed data was discussed within the research team to further support trustworthiness.

Findings and discussion

In keeping with narrative research, the analysis and discussion are presented co-terminously, to enable the reader to better understand the researchers' 'reading' of the data. By doing this it is hoped that interpretations are transparent, and presented in such a way as to persuade, rather than prove (Fraser, 2004), but are always open to question (Butler, 2005).

While the first stage of analysis identified numerous themes specific to each participant, the second stage, which is presented here, identified two main themes common across the five narratives: '*It's a struggle*,' 'and *'My emotionally dirty work*'. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of each participant.

'It's a struggle'

Culshaw and Kurian (2021) argue that far from being a competency-based concept, struggling is an aspect of wellbeing. When people struggle, they need chance to repair and heal. This requires both personal agency and supportive structures. Drawing on the work of Durkheim (2001 [1912]) and Bourdieu (1987), the current study conceptualises struggling as an emotional experience where participants competed for status, value, and recognition. In keeping with the rich complexity of human existence, those participating in the current study demonstrated how struggling per se was interwoven in several themes within their personal narratives. These struggles can be compounded through vicariously experiencing the struggles of others, namely pupils (and their families) and colleagues, as well as their own perceptions and experiences. These are presented as subthemes under the following headings: *'From pupil to pastoral staff', 'Sharing with colleagues' and 'Personal struggles.'*

'From pupil to pastoral staff'

All narratives demonstrate how participants' concerns about pupils' struggles have a negative impact on their psychological wellbeing. Participants contextualised pupils' struggles within social and medical models of disability (Stanforth & Rose, 2020). Macleod (2006) conceptualised this as '*sad*' or '*mad*.' The behaviour of '*sad*' pupils being understood in terms of their adverse

social or family situations. Participants identified their experience of indirect trauma in terms of domestic violence, separation and loss, neglect, and abuse.

> *'The level of abuse and neglect it's horrendous'* (Dianne),

> *' . . . through the care system so many times, attachment issues . . . so many complex issues . . . '.* (Steve)

The struggles of pupils contextualised as '*mad*,' were perceived as their behaviour being pathological. This view may be influenced by the diagnosis of 'disorders' (Caslin, 2019; Stanforth & Rose, 2020),

> *' . . . autistic children . . . '* (Dianne).

> *" . . . ODD . . . . Autism . . . and ADHD* "(Steve).

Labels are social constructs that help people to understand their environment and share their experiences (Mowat, 2015). Labels appear to be used to explain pupils' difficulties, and their challenging behaviour. Participants in the current study appeared confident in their ability to support pupils' mental health needs. However, some pupils' behaviour was explained in terms of both social and pathological antecedents,

> *' . . . one child with ASD, whose father is very abusive, mum's a drug addict, alcohol issues, lots of issues*'. (Chris)

The repetition and forceful delivery of descriptions of traumatic events experienced by pupils together with their SEMH needs, was used to explain challenging behaviour, suggesting that they held significance for the participants (Overcash, 2003).

None of the participants described pupils as '*bad*' (Macleod, 2006). Denying pupils have agency may illustrate how participants intellectualise the causes of challenging behaviour as being outside the pupil's control. This may help them to be more compassionate (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2019). Compassion satisfaction can ameliorate the psychological impact of indirect trauma (Bridger et al., 2020), thus reducing emotional distress and burn-out (Klimecki et al., 2013).

'Sharing with colleagues'

A second aspect of the experience of struggle arises from interactions and observations of colleagues. This is a potent theme within Dianne, Gail, and Steve's narratives. Dianne experiences her frustration and stress working with colleagues who she thinks are unsuited to a pastoral role,

> *' . . . support workers . . . have not been suitable for that kind of environment . . . '.*(Dianne)

Gail responds to the struggles of her colleagues by becoming the rescuer in a drama triangle (Karpman, 1968). This is evidenced where she takes on the responsibilities of other staff because she feels that they lack,

' . . . the confidence to make decisions' (Gail).

Steve frames his colleagues' struggles in terms of their limited understanding of the challenges they will face in a SEMH school,

> *' . . . people come from mainstream going "it's going to be easy" and bang, instantly . . . . every young person . . . would spot the trigger, their weakness and they'll go for it . . . new staff come in . . . and maybe they were scared by the young people'.* (Steve)

Steve also vividly describes a colleague becoming a '*shell of himself*' (Steve) because he was unable to cope with the challenges and was unable or unwilling to seek out the support of his team. Steve appears to have found it difficult to understand why this person did not access the support that was offered.

'Personal struggles'

The third aspect of struggle arises from participants' direct, rather than vicarious experiences. In keeping with the findings of Middleton (2018) and Middleton (2019), the limited understanding and acknowledgment of the challenges involved in pastoral support with pupils with complex SEMH needs, caused participants to feel undervalued, misunderstood, and marginalised.

> *' . . . as a support worker . . . the majority of the time, you do get overlooked'.* (Dianne)

> *'. it gets misconstrued, what the role is, and that's part of the issue*'. (Gail)

> *' . . . the wider world doesn't understand what we have to go through in school . . . that's upset me quite a lot, actually'.* (Chris)

Elements associated with the lack of understanding are the fear and stress that comes from experiencing aggressive and violent behaviour.

> *'It can get physical too. I've been punched, head-butted, spat at, bitten, kicked . . . when it's happening, it's extremely stressful*'. (Dianne)

> *'I don't get frightened easily, but . . . I remember shaking, I remember shaking . . . '.* (Gail)

> *'They can explode and be violent or aggressive. For no reason a young person may call you an f'ing "c", or other unpleasant names . . . that is quite stressful'.* (Milly)

A response to these threats is to partake in what is described as the surface acting aspect of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting occurs where employees are obliged to mask or falsify their true emotions, to comply

with the organisation's feeling rules. The person may feel a certain emotion, but it is different to the one they display.

> *'You've got to stay neutral in a way and not kind of put what you're feeling on to the rest of the class . . .'.* (Dianne)

> *'I get that adrenalin feeling in my stomach, where my heart is thumping quite fast, but I try to stay really calm and not let anybody see that'.* (Gail)

Participants used differing strategies to try to avoid these situations,

> *' . . . if I got put with a young person who I really didn't feel comfortable working with, I could say to another staff member can we swap?'.* (Milly)

A particular aspect of the pastoral role that appeared to create fear, for Milly and Gail, is working on a one-to-one basis with pupils in community situations, away from the school building.

> *'I could be in the community with the highest risk young person, who I don't feel safe working with . . . '.* (Milly)

> *' . . . that was a pretty bad situation, at that point, for feeling a bit anxious'.* (Gail)

In contrast to the above Chris enjoyed working with pupils in their homes or community settings. It is when this stopped, due to Covid-19, that she struggled.

> *'I felt useless . . . That child is crying out for somebody to just go and see them, and I can't, I can't do it. . . . it's worse at the minute. . .'.* (Chris)

Not being able to visit the pupils caused Chris and Gail to ruminate as to whether pupils were okay,

> *'I think . . . are you okay? That's the one that gets to me'* (Chris).
> *" . . . you're still thinking, 'Is everybody okay?"* (Gail).

Such rumination can intensify negative emotions (Held et al., 2019). Opportunities for pastoral staff to switch-off and detach themselves from their work may promote psychological wellbeing, through improved mood and less fatigue (Sharrocks, 2014; Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). Chris stated,

> *' . . . our emotional health . . . I don't think it's addressed enough at all . . . '.* (Chris)

The literature clearly demonstrates the importance of creating an emotionally contained, holding environment (Winnicott, 1956). The support available to the participants appeared to be perceived as inadequate,

> *' . . . It was just an offload at the end of the day, which helped, but then you had to go back into it the day after, just doing the same thing because there was no direction really'.* (Dianne)

> *'We had a bit of a post-briefing where we all talked about it, but it kind of got a bit heated . . . '*. (Gail)

'Off-loading' can support emotional wellbeing (Mackenzie, 2012; Partridge, 2012; Rae et al., 2017). However, Dianne appeared to be looking for more practical direction. This suggests that she is seeking advice on how to prevent difficult situations arising in the future. In the absence of organisational support Chris states,

> *' . . . we have our own support network that's not the SLT type of thing . . . I do feel like I'm supported in that sense but not on a higher level'*. (Chris)

Dianne, Gail, and Chris felt that there was a lack of organisational support to assist them to process difficult emotions. Opportunities for reflective practice can enable people to feel emotionally contained by processing difficult emotional experiences (Mackenzie, 2012; Partridge, 2012; Rae et al., 2017; Willis & Baines, 2018). This can support psychological wellbeing and improve emotional resilience (Willis & Baines, 2018).

'My emotionally dirty work'

The concept of dirty work consists of three elements of taint; physical, social, and moral (Hughes, 1962). People performing dirty jobs can become tainted and seen by wider society as *'dirty workers'* (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 413). McMurray and Ward (2014) expanded Hughes's (1962) typology by adding emotional dirt, a concept arising from emotionally difficult work. It is important to stress that, in the current study, the reference to taint and dirt, does not relate to labelling SEMH pupils or participants as dirty or tainted. Rather it is an evocative phrase used to stress that some work, viewed as undesirable or degrading, exists to solve a perceived societal problem that may undermine a community's sense of self (Hughes, 1962). Thus, dirt is situational, defined by its context (McMurray & Ward, 2014).

In the current study the concept of dirt can be attributed to several elements of pastoral work in SEMH secondary schools. Social taint (McMurray & Ward, 2014) can arise from the labelling and stigmatising of pupils who have been excluded from other schools, due to behaviour that challenges those institutions (Caslin, 2019). The pupils' anger (Edwards, 2016), violence (Willis & Baines, 2018) and verbal abuse (Gillies & Robinson, 2010) is conceptualised as the dirt that feeds into society's fears that good order will be dismantled (Hughes, 1962; Kleres, 2010). The person working with the dirt can become tainted and through courtesy stigma, become devalued (Broomhead, 2016). Emotionally dirty work is presented under the following subthemes: '*Low down the pecking order*', *'What is my job'*, *'Digging deep; emotional intense work'*, and *'Looking after me'*.

'Low down the pecking order'

McMurray and Ward (2014) argue that people who experience taint often occupy positions that are low in the organisational hierarchy. Participants presented evidence of their perception that this is the case in SEMH schools,

> *'You're just the extra body in the room . . . you have very little impact on how things are done'*. (Dianne)

> *" . . . my role's quite low down in the organisation . . .* (Milly).

Recruiting staff with little, or no previous experience, may also suggest that pastoral staff are undervalued,

> *' . . . a lot of support staff have not got the knowledge and understanding . . . Not one of them has worked in education before. Not one of them is trained in how to support teaching and learning in a classroom. Not one of them has got any idea or inkling of the type of children that they're supposed to be supporting'. (Dianne)*

> *' . . . we have a tough job, and I don't think people realise that . . . I don't think the emotional side is recognised by Ofsted, by the government, by the local authority, by the headteachers even sometimes'*. (Chris)

Attributing emotional dirt to pastoral work in SEMH schools, may cause pastoral workers to be devalued, both within schools and the wider educational landscape.

'What is my job?'

Pastoral roles are often ill-defined. Unlike teaching roles, there are no professional standards linked to these jobs. This can cause confusion and misunderstanding.

> *'There's a lot there for teachers but for support workers, it's kind of a case of you each support each other and you filter down how you practice . . . '*. (Dianne)

> *' . . . it gets misconstrued, what the role is, and that's part of the issue sometimes, that it's not ironed out enough . . . '*. (Gail)

The participants describe how teachers have clear role expectations and structures, with a focus on pedagogy.

> *' . . . the teachers do the academic and if there's any issues, they're* [the pupils] *referred to pastoral. It's a very different role . . . very different'*. (Chris)

Participants perceived the teaching role as less stressful,

> *' . . . if you're a bit higher up, say a teacher . . . that's much less stressful'*. (Milly)

Institutional and systemic structures may act as a barrier to emotional dirt and offer teachers protection against emotional taint that are not available

to pastoral staff. This may appear to challenge Broomhead's (2016) assertion that teachers in SEMH schools can become stigmatised due to their association with stigmatised pupils. However, there are important differences between the concepts of stigma and taint. The former reflects disparaging interpretations of moral status, which serve to devalue a person (Goffman, 1963). Taint refers to the 'dirtiness' of work-related tasks (Kreiner et al., 2006). McMurray and Ward (2014) suggest that emotional dirt and taint are also distinct themes. Emotional dirt includes elements such as emotions, emotional labour, threats, and burdens. Taint, they argue, consists of stigma, othering, and contamination. The dirty work experienced by the pastoral staff in the current study, encompasses both emotional dirt and taint, perhaps reflecting the hierarchical and structural nature of school life.

'Digging deep; emotional intense work'

In-line with the extant literature, the current study found that pastoral staff are involved in the most emotionally intense work (Middleton, 2019; Partridge, 2012; Willis & Baines, 2018). The participants experience somatic and emotional responses to the unwelcome emotions that arises from their work,

> '*. . . stress . . . lack of sleep because I am worrying the night before. I come home and might snap at my family*'. (Milly)

> '*. . . I just felt drained that day . . . My body felt tired, but my mind was not . . .* '. (Gail)

There is also clear evidence within the narratives that pastoral staff perceive that the challenges they face in SEMH schools are not widely known.

> *'People don't expect what we face* [pause]. *There's always something going on in the children's lives . . . . that can be quite stressful'*. (Gail)

> *'I don't think the emotional side is recognised by Ofsted, by the government, by the local authority, by the headteachers even sometimes . . . '. (Chris)*

Similarly, participants describe significant differences between SEMH schools and mainstream settings. This includes the different philosophical and practical approaches and expectations.

> '*It's more of the mainstream mentality of, we're a school, we've got targets to hit and we're going to hit them*'. (Dianne)

> *'Very mainstream thinking . . . That the only things that happen are within the classroom . . . '*. (Chris)

This lack of awareness of the role of pastoral staff in SEMH secondary schools suggests that people from outside of these environments are ill-placed to pass judgement or assign taint to those who work in them (McMurray & Ward, 2014).

In the current study some participants choose language that aligns their work to the concept of dirt and contamination. Steve likens work stresses to,

> *' . . . a bit of a disease inside . . . '* (Steve).

Gail uses the word '*toxic'* in several contexts. She describes the home lives of some pupils,

> *' . . . they're* [the pupils] *living with troubled families. And in a really toxic environment . . . at home'*. (Gail)

In relation to her own work and the impact it has on her, she suggests,

> *' . . . such a toxic a role. You know, it does feel like toxic stress sometimes . . .'*. (Gail)

Choosing the words *'disease*' and '*toxic*' may indicate that Steve and Gail perceive aspects of their work to be dirty, although they do not specifically frame it as such. Both nouns suggest contamination. Dirtiness is a social construct, as is the fear of contamination. This interpretation suggests that the taint and stigma experienced by pupils attending SEMH secondary schools may also be mirrored in the experiences of pastoral staff. It may explain why some of the most '*dirty jobs'* within education are contracted out to SEMH secondary schools, through school exclusions, and ultimately to pastoral staff within those schools. The lack of research related to this topic may suggests some apathy in relation to the psychological wellbeing of staff who work within an emotionally dirty environment (McMurray & Ward, 2014) and who are lower in the occupational hierarchy (Hughes, 1962).

'Looking after me.'

As a means of self-protection, the tainted workers may attempt to minimise the negative aspects of their role, replacing it with more positive ones (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). All the participants cite making a difference to the lives of pupils as a positive aspect of their jobs,

> *' . . . the lads leave knowing that somebody's cared'* (Dianne),

> *' . . . I know that I am making a positive difference to the young people'*. (Milly)

> *' . . . making the difference to them makes a bigger difference to me'* (Steve).

These findings are supportive of what McMurray and Ward (2014) term a *'good call'* (p1132). This relates to aspects of work from which people gained personal satisfaction. They suggest this response was most notable when people displayed their skills, and successfully dealt with others' emotional problems. This finding was echoed in the current study,

> *' . . . it's all about attuning and validating feelings. I always had that ability to be able to see that a child was not quite right, . . . '*. (Dianne)

"*My skills are to de-escalate the situation . . .* "(Gail).

There are indications that some of the participants regret not being able to achieve more for the pupils. This is couched in terms that indicate a sense of futility,

'*. . . you kind of know that there's still a lot more could have been done and they're still not in a good place. That's another downside . . .*'. (Dianne)

'*. . . she's come on in leaps and bounds but . . . she's leaving us in a few months, and I don't know what's going to happen to her . . .* '. (Chris)

The perception of poor pupil outcomes may affect job satisfaction, limiting a sense of purpose (Ryff, 2014). If intervening in the pupils' lives led to better outcomes, then it is possible that the emotional dirt may be diminished.

McMurray and Ward (2014) position emotions as an element of dirt. This held relevance to the current study, as emotions played an essential role in the conceptualisation of psychological well-being. Experiencing unwanted emotions may heighten the perceived threat of contamination. The suppression of difficult emotions, and the expression of more positive ones, was identified in the current study.

'*. . . you don't want to come across as like whatever's just gone on has affected you. You've got to stay neutral*'. (Dianne)

'*. . . stay really calm and not let anybody see*' (Gail)

Successfully managing emotions, so their expression is more authentic, may offer some protection against the threat of taint, through improving the quality of relationships (Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000). This in turn, may help to improve psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 2014).

In summary the two main themes: '*It's a struggle*', and '*My emotionally dirty work*' generated a deeper understanding of the participants' experience through the articulation of the seven subthemes. '*It's a struggle'* has been conceptualised as an emotional experience, emanating from direct and indirect exposure to traumatic or challenging situations. Participants articulated their struggles in terms of those that were personal to them, and those generated from the pupils they work with. To counterbalance these two sources of emotional strife, participants recognised the role of sharing their experiences with colleagues, and the part this action played in dissipating the emotionality attached to such struggles.

The two main themes, '*It's a struggle*', and '*My emotionally dirty work*' can also be linked, the former being compounded by the latter. Being '*Low down the pecking order*', not having a clear idea of one's job is, (*What is my job'*), and having to *'Dig deep'* due to the *'emotionally intense work'*, all contribute to the struggles when working in SEMH schools. In the theme '*My emotionally dirty work*' the dirt and taint experienced arises from the nature of their roles and the

hierarchical structures within which they work. As a means of self-protection, the tainted workers may attempt to minimise the negative aspects of their role, replacing it with more positive ones evident in the subthemes of *'Looking after me'*

Conclusion

The concepts of *'struggle'* and *'dirty work'* have provided conceptual lenses, through which the psychological impact of undertaking pastoral work in an SEMH school can be better understood. The multi-dimensional origins of struggles; vicariously experienced from observing the struggles of pupils and colleagues, and directly from participants' own perceptions and processing of events, have implications for policy makers and educational practice, the former in relation to recruitment protocols, and the latter the development of appropriate training and tailored supervision. The examination of emotionally dirty work in an educational context builds on existing literature outside of educational settings. In addition, an 'ethos of care' within SEMH schools could mitigate against the impact of struggles and work perceived as emotionally dirty. As this is the first study to explore this topic, further research may determine whether studies with larger and more demographically diverse samples have similar findings.

Implications for policy and practice

To date, the voices of pastoral staff have not been adequately heard within the research community. Therefore, their experiences are not reflected in policy and there is no guidance in relation to professional standards for pastoral work. This study has demonstrated that such guidance would provide a helpful framework within which role expectations and responsibilities would sit. This would give potential candidates applying for pastoral positions an accurate portrayal of the demands of the role, and support school leaders to employ people with suitable experience and aptitude. This coupled with appropriate, quality assured training being made available, would go some way to addressing the misunderstandings and lack of status and value experienced by pastoral staff.

The benefits of reflective practice are well documented in the literature (Edwards, 2016; Fitzsimmons et al., 2019; Middleton, 2019, 2018; Partridge, 2012; Rae et al., 2017; Willis & Baines, 2018). However, few schools appear to be offering this to pastoral staff. This study has identified that tailored supervision, encompassing reflection and practice support, could address some of the psychological challenges faced by pastoral staff. Approaches that address the emotional skills needed to perform pastoral work, in addition to understanding emotional labour, may equip people for the emotional demands of the work.

Building a culture where pastoral staff have a voice and feel valued could help them to deal with their struggles and help to remove the '*dirt*' from their work (Knight, 2013).

Study limitations

Limitations of the study must be acknowledged. Firstly, findings relate to a small sample of pastoral staff. Although the sample size was deemed sufficient for this narrative research, further studies with larger samples may reveal whether similar results are found. In terms of gender and ethnicity, the sample consisted of four female and one male participant, all white British. This is unlikely to be representative of the wider population of pastoral staff. Four of the five participants work in independent schools, one in an academy. Whether this has impacted on the data is unknown. Thus, caution must be exercised in applying the findings to differing contexts. Despite these limitations, this is the first study to explore the experiences of pastoral staff working in SEMH secondary schools.

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